

ARS NOVA ARCHETYPICA, ACIDA ET PRÆCLARA

... a peculiar sensibility of temperament,
a passionate devotion to the intricacies,
perhaps even more than to the orthodox
and easily recognizable beauties, of musical
science.

E.A. Poe: *The Fall of
the House of Usher.*

By following iconographical sources or illuminated manuscripts, documents in the treasures of cathedrals, and sometimes living traditions, musicologists rebuild ancient sounds for us. Ethereal voices, stringed laments of joys from spiritual universes which were deeply earthed for so, so long... Scholarly and erudition make it possible, but rarely someone told us about faces, gestures, expressions of joyfulness or, quite the contrary, faces worn out by the greed of time or melancholy, and the like. We have only few graphical, plastic references of these composers, but expressionless, primitive in their making: small portraits of Guillaume de Machault or Francesco Landini, frankly disappointing all of them in this regard.



I cannot perceive through those minimal portraits a severe minimum about the spirit of *ars nova* and its *rationale of sadness*. And how about Philippe de Vitry? Not a single trace of his face was left. And how about Solage? The alchemy of time only left us *fumeux fume par fumée*. Neither, then, scholarly nor erudition were enough for helping us, in this case of ours, but a patient task through a strange mode of inference: from his counterpoints and dissonances, from his sequences and chansons, I shall certainly infer Philippe's de Vitry face. Do not enquire about the oddity of this inferential method of mine, because this is a matter of *rapture*. . . My reader may well also wonder about the omnipresence of lemons throughout this set of oil paintings: my first suggestion is merely aesthetic; I mean, *ars nova* is a well assembled *library of sophisticated dissonances*, in the same way that a lemon is a kind of —so to speak— "*dissonance*" of *taste*. Borges used to say that *dejectedness* —a favorite topic in *ars nova* lyrics— is a form of *spiritual or intellectual lucidity*, and I dare to add that it is an acid, corrosive maceration of mind as well, as if these composers were following literally what the Books of Ecclesiastes says:

For in much wisdom *is* much grief: and he that increaseth
knowledge increaseth sorrow. . . *It is* better to go to the house
of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that
is the end of all men;

This latter explanation is by far more meaningful than a simpler aesthetic one. It is said that Horace pretended to invent a totally unprecedented, unseen creature, by thinking about a sort of strange, long black-necked bird. He did not know that in the very precise moment that his "invention" happened, through the rivers of Australia was swimming such a graceful galleon-like bird, or what we call today "a black-necked swan." Likewise, I do not have any knowledge about Franciscus' de Insula faces or Jacopo's da Bologna one, but pretentiously I state that they must have been composing in the vast Ocean of God, so graciously as those elegant black-necked swans from the Australian rivers. Here I present their Archetypes, among others.

